

Butterflies of Switzerland

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Travelling 22-27 June 2016, this short trip to the Valais province of southern Switzerland was designed around butterflies. A little early in the season for peak variety - high altitude species were largely not flying, but in temperatures up to 36 C, a good range of species were present in the middle altitudes, including highlights such as Apollo, Clouded Apollo and Hungarian Glider.

For logistics, I flew in and out of Milan, renting a car and driving the three hours to Switzerland. There, I stayed in the small town of Raron, an ideal base for exploration of the mountain valleys in each direction. Weather is always going to be a bit of a gamble in the Alps - on this trip, three days were exceptional with sunshine and very high temperatures rising to 28 C in the high valleys and 36 C in the Rhone Valley, one was mixed but mostly good, whilst one was basically rain throughout.

DAILY LOG 22 July. Simpson Pass. Arrived in Milan at midday, rented a car, then drove about three hours to Simplon Pass, altitude 2005 metres. Warm and sunny, 24 C, I had expected a lot of butterflies here, but with the exception of abundant Little Blues, several Green Hairstreaks and a few Dingy Skippers and Grizzled Skippers, there was almost nothing flying. Concluding I was perhaps two or three weeks too early for all the high altitude specialities, I then headed down towards the Rhone Valley, stopping at roadside meadows near Rothwald, altitude 1750 metres, temperature 30 C. Somewhat better here with a good range of species seen, most notably including several Apollos, ten Mountain Clouded Yellows, one Large Blue, five Escher's Blues and a Queen of Spain Fritillary. Late in the afternoon, I continued to Raron, base for the next few days. A few Marbled Whites drifting about, so too Southern Small Whites.

23 July. Saas Valley, Leuk & Lonza Valley. Started the day in the Saas Valley, arriving in mid-altitude meadows at about 9.00 am. Checked out several sites, each producing quite good selections, the top butterflies of the morning including Clouded Apollos, Swallowtail, both Clouded Yellow and Mountain Clouded Yellow, Rock Grayling and Alpine Grayling, Almond-eyed Ringlet and Alpine Heath. Plenty of commoner species too. Climbing to the higher altitude areas around Saas Reservoir however, both abundance and variety again failed to impress - the species mix was very similar to that of Simplon Pass, with Little Blues and Dingy and Grizzled Skippers the main species on the wing. Returned to the Rhone Valley in the early afternoon - stinking hot, the temperature hitting an impressive 36 C, quite unexpected for Switzerland. Travelled a little to the west to explore a riverside track at Leuk - saw a grand total of two species of butterflies here, but fortunately both were top class species indeed. The first, doing little sorties from trackside trees, were Hungarian Gliders, a superb butterfly that was high on my list of desired target species. Two individuals present, these truly lived up to their name, gliding around the shady glade in big loops before settling on leaves two to three up, then revealing quite stunning underwings. Enjoyed these for a while, all the time wilting under the high temperature, then began to wander back to the car. Then I bumped into the second species of the walk, a splendid Iolas Blue taking nectar at flowers. And that was it, a mere three individual butterflies of just two species, hardly an abundance to write home about, but classy butterflies both. Finished the day by taking a random turn into the mountains north of the Rhone Valley, stumbling across the superb Lonza Valley. Though quite late in the day, this valley immediately oozed potential - fantastic flower meadows and many butterflies still on the wing, Clouded Apollos seeming common, Little Blues everywhere, quite a few Mountain Clouded Yellows, a couple of Alpine Heaths, one Almond-eyed Ringlet. One Geranium Argus. With the sun dipping beneath the high mountain peaks, I vowed to return the following day and thus returned to Raron for the evening. 37 species this day, a moderately good total given the lack of high altitude species.

24 July. Lonza Valley. Splendid day in the Lonza Valley, 28 C and unbroken sunshine, stunning landscapes and masses of butterflies. Not a lot of butterflies in the higher areas at the head of the valley, but the flower meadows at a slightly lower altitude were simply a treat - an excellent variety and the number of individuals high. An absolute minimum of 150 Clouded Apollos, four 'standard' Apollos, two Scarce Swallowtails, three Swallowtails, 30 or so Geranium Argus, one Northern Brown Argus, several species of fritillary, loads of Orange Tips, Alpine Heaths and Mazarine Blues, plus a good couple of dozen more species. Also saw one Alpine Chamois and several Alpine Marmots. Managed to spend almost the whole day in this valley, but did return to Raron late in the afternoon, sizzling at 34 C, where a short walk along the river added a few Marbled Whites to the day tally, along with Eastern Bath White and another Hungarian Glider.

25 June. Trient Valley & Lonza Valley. Bad weather day! Woke to thick cloud, on and off rain. Drove 150km west in the hope of finding better, arriving at the Trient Valley near Martinge to skies that indeed did look more promising, patches of blue and spells of sun. Took a quick walk on the outskirts of the village, seeing Scarce Swallowtail, Purple-shot Copper and Black-veined White, before black clouds again rolled in, obliterating the sun, bringing sustained rain and dashing any further hope of butterflies. Attempted to once again drive out of the rain by crossing the mountain chain into France, but things were even worse there with the temperature only 13 C and the rain absolutely torrential. Didn't even get out of the car! With things looking pretty much set for the duration, I gave up and returned to Raron, the day effectively washed out. Rain continued till 3.30 pm when finally the clouds broke and blue skies returned. Quickly nipped out and returned to the Lonza Valley for a couple of pretty productive hours, many butterflies emerging to dry their wings and lap up the sunshine. Good photo opportunities for Clouded Apollos, these very mobile on previous days, along with other species such as Alpine-eyed Ringlet and Alpine Heath. Ended the day with a very photogenic Alpine Marmot, a youngster sunbathing on a pile of rocks.

27 June. Centovalli & Bergamo. Cloudy start in Raron again, so drove east this time in search of better weather, exiting

Switzerland via the Simplon Pass and re-entering in the Centovalli region. Excellent weather here, bright sun and about 25 C, and a reasonable range of butterflies in this landscape of steep wooded valleys and occasional meadows. Highlight was a Woodland Ringlet, though Clouded Apollo, Swallowtail, Pearly Heath and Purple-edged Copper were also seen, along with a dozen or so other species. Crossed into Italy in the early afternoon, heading for Bergamo to then spend a couple of hours along the river east of airport. Masses of Painted Ladies on budleias, a minimum of 150 present, plus a few nice bits and bobs in the dry grassland adjacent, Eastern Bath White, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Brown Argus and Spotted Fritillary the highlights. As evening approached, returned the rental car and checked into a hotel near the airport. A massive thunderstorm concluded the day! 28 June. Departure. 6.30 am flight out of Milan, end of trip. SPECIES LIST In total, 59 species were seen, a reasonable total, but one that would have been considerably higher if this trip had been timed two or three weeks later to coincide with the flights of the high altitude species.

Swallowtail. One in the Saas Valley, three in the Lonza Valley, one in Centovalli. Scarce Swallowtail. Two in the Lonza Valley, one in the Trient Valley. Apollo. Eight in the valley below Simplon Pass, four in the Lonza Valley. Clouded Apollo. Five in the Saas Valley, approximately 200 in the Lonza Valley, one in Centovalli. Large White. Two in the valley below Simplon Pass, ten in the Saas Valley, five in the Lonza Valley, four in Centovalli, three at Bergamo. Southern Small White. Four in the valley below Simplon Pass, ten in the Saas Valley. Green-veined White. Two at Raron, six at Bergamo. Mountain Green-veined White. Five in the Lonza Valley. Black-veined White. One in the Trient Valley. Eastern Bath White. One at Raron, two at Bergamo. Mountain Dappled White. One in the Lonza Valley. Orange Tip. Fifteen in the valley below Simplon Pass, at least 25 in the Saas Valley, ten in the Lonza Valley, one in Centovalli. Mountain Clouded Yellow. Ten at Simplon Pass, two in the Saas Valley, 13 in the Lonza Valley. Clouded Yellow. Six in the Saas Valley, at least 15 in the Lonza Valley. Berger's Clouded Yellow. Two at Bergamo. Brimstone. One in the valley below Simplon Pass, one in Centovalli. Wood White. Ten in the Lonza Valley, four in Centovalli, two at Bergamo. Green Hairstreak. Eight at Simplon Pass, two in the Lonza Valley. Purple-edged Copper. One in the Lonza Valley, three in Centovalli. Purple-shot Copper. One in the Trient Valley. Sooty Copper. One in the Lonza Valley. Little Blue. Common at the Simplon Pass, in the Saas Valley and in the Lonza Valley, with up to 60 a day at each of these localities. Holly Blue. Four at Bergamo. Large Blue. One in the valley below Simplon Pass. Iolas Blue. One at Leuk. Geranium Argus. Two in the Saas Valley, at least 30 in the Lonza Valley. Northern Brown Argus (Mountain Argus). One in the Lonza Valley. Brown Argus. One at Bergamo. Mazarine Blue. At least 25 in the Lonza Valley. Escher's Blue. Five in the valley below Simplon Pass. Common Blue. Ten in the valley below Simplon Pass, at least 30 in the Saas Valley, 35 in the Lonza Valley, four in Centovalli, at least 14 at Bergamo. Hungarian Glider. Two at Leuk, one at Raron. Peacock. Two in Centovalli. Red Admiral. Eight in the Lonza Valley, one in Centovalli. Painted Lady. One in the Saas Valley, two in the Lonza Valley, at least 150 at Bergamo. Small Tortoiseshell. Four at Simplon Pass, eight in the Saas Valley, at least 35 in the Lonza Valley, two in Centovalli. Queen of Spain Fritillary. One in the valley below Simplon Pass. Spotted Fritillary. Two at Bergamo. Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Two in the Saas Valley, 16 in the Lonza Valley, four in the Trient Valley. False Heath Fritillary. One in the Saas Valley, one in the Lonza Valley. Heath Fritillary. One in the valley below Simplon Pass, at least 20 in the Lonza Valley, three in the Trient Valley, two in Centovalli. Marbled White. At least 20 in the Saas Valley, at least 10 at Raron, eight in Centovalli. (Lesser) Rock Grayling. One in the Saas Valley. Alpine Grayling. One in the Saas Valley. Ringlet. Six in the Saas Valley, eight in the Trient Valley, four in Centovalli. Almond-eyed Ringlet. One in the Saas Valley, three in the Lonza Valley. Woodland Ringlet. One in Centovalli. Meadow Brown. One in the Saas Valley, six in the Trient Valley, five in Centovalli. Small Heath. Two in the valley below Simplon Pass, one in the Saas Valley, six at Raron, two in the Trient Valley, six at Bergamo. Alpine Heath. Six in the Saas Valley, approximately 30 in the Lonza Valley. Pearly Heath. Three in Centovalli. Wall Brown. One in the Saas Valley. Large Wall Brown. One in the valley below Simplon Pass, one in the Saas Valley, one in the Trient Valley, one in Centovalli. Northern Wall Brown. Three in the Saas Valley, two in the Lonza Valley. Grizzled Skipper. Ten at Simplon Pass, 15 in the Saas Valley, 20 in the Lonza Valley. Dingy Skipper. Six at Simplon Pass, six in the Saas Valley, 12 in the Lonza Valley, two in the Trient Valley. Essex Skipper. Two in the Saas Valley. Small Skipper. One in the valley below Simplon Pass, three in the Saas Valley, one in the Lonza Valley, one in Centovalli. Large Skipper. Five in the Saas Valley, one in Centovalli.